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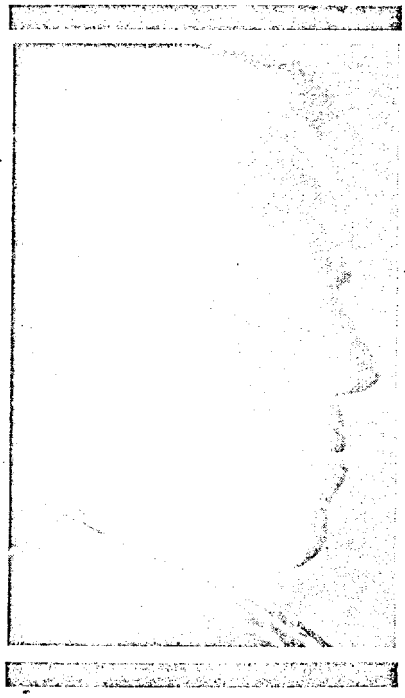
White House

NIXON'S HALDEMAN: POWER IS PROXIMITY

BY CHRISTOPHER S. WREN



His title—Assistant to the President of the United States—is outrageously deadpan. It hints at so much, reveals so very little. That is appropriate enough for Harry Robbins Haldeman, an adamantine Californian who serves President Richard M. Nixon as the White House chief of staff. After 15 years with Nixon, Haldeman is still viewed through a glass darkly, though his presence pervades the hallways of power. Whoever and whatever enters the President's Oval Office, whoever and whatever emerges must pass through Bob Haldeman. His colleague, John Ehrlichman, likens him to the Lord Chamberlain of yore, and another White House staffer privately calls him "by far the second most important man in government."

Haldeman does not accept the latter accolade: "All the power in the White House is in one man. I don't think there are seconds or thirds or fourths." He is not trying to mislead. Haldeman sees himself as just a faithful toiler in the Administration vineyards, though he concedes: "There's an adage about power relating to proximity, and the people most in touch with the President are going to have more influence. . . ."

Such men are a handful: John D. Ehrlichman, Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs; Henry A. Kissinger, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs; George P. Shultz, Director of the Office of Management and Budget; John N. Mitchell, Attorney General; and H. R. Haldeman, who keeps the wheels of the Presidency turning.

"People say Haldeman doesn't have a policy role," says an associate. "However, there's no major decision out of the President's office that he hasn't participated in." Nixon and Haldeman have been compared to twin prongs on a tuning fork. In fact, Haldeman is calibrated so precisely on the President's frequency that he can scout solutions to problems not yet pondered, like a sort of intellectual advance man. "I track well with him," explains Haldeman in the White House argot.

Not surprisingly, Haldeman calls himself "a Nixon Republican. I don't have much trouble with Nixon's positions. Of course, as you become integrally involved in forming them, you become pretty much convinced. . . ."

Bob Haldeman, at 44, is lean, unfaddishly crew-cut and tanned (a result of his thirst for sunshine). When he breaks into a hungry grin, he can charm, but more often he appears formidably preoccupied. He dresses in neat Ivy League suits with white button-down-collar shirts at a time when fashion color riots outside on Pennsylvania Avenue. His regimental striped ties are throttled with a gold Nixon-signature tie clasp. A small enamel American flag lives in his lapel. Haldeman resembles less the savvy pol than some diligent combat commander returned from the Asian wars to a civilian world that has drifted on in his absence.

Then, consider the mind. It is just plain remarkable. He can concentrate in assorted directions at once. When he reads, he gobbles words at up to 2,500 a minute. Some years ago, Haldeman heard about Mensa, a society that purports to restrict its ranks to the smartest two percent of the human race. He was curious enough to take the tests, passed of course, and then having learned he was brilliant, let his membership lapse.

That Henry Kissinger, the bespectacled Harvard professor, has been seized upon by the press as this Administration's "swinger" gives some measure of how straight the White House crowd is. Even among them, Haldeman stands like Caesar's wife, above suspicion. His wife Jo may be a stronger Christian Scientist than he, but Haldeman has no tolerance for dissipation. He tried to smoke a pipe, couldn't keep it lit. He doesn't

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really drink or party, and hoards his sparse free time with his family in the Republican suburban redoubt of Kenwood, Md. For kicks, he shoots home movies and plays a guitar; he digs the Beatles and Johnny Cash over the glib Washington social gossip. "He hates small talk," says Hugh Sutherland, a Los Angeles ad man who has been Haldeman's chum since boyhood. "I can envision Bob standing in the middle of a cocktail party and being completely bored."

Though his Dutch, German and Swiss ancestry has been kneaded into a cliché, Haldeman more accurately reflects the conservative side of Beverly Hills, Calif., where he grew up. He was an ROTC company commander in prep school, enrolled at the University of Redlands, switched to USC and wound up at UCLA.

Haldeman took a job in advertising, moving to San Francisco, New York and back to Los Angeles with the J. Walter Thompson agency. Other Thompson alumni have migrated from L.A. to the White House: press secretary Ronald Ziegler, appointments secretary Dwight Chapin, and Haldeman's own aides, Lawrence Higby and Bruce Kehrli. "It's easy to knock an ad man," says Dwight Chapin, "but a good advertising man is a good marketing man, and he knows what's going on."

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That was true of Haldeman, who rose fast, to an account supervisor for insecticides, waxes and shaving creams, then to manager of the L.A. office, the youngest man ever in that spot. He ran a taut outfit, trusted by his subordinates and—more important—by the clients.

But politics kept wooing him away. "When I was at UCLA," says Haldeman, "I was fascinated by the Communist-front organizations, what they were trying to do." His grandfather had been militantly anti-Communist, and Haldeman rooted for the Mundt-Nixon bill pushing through Congress. Anti-Communism brought him to Richard M. Nixon. "I volunteered for the '52 campaign, but I was unable to work out any role at that time. I faded away and came back in 1956. I was enormously impressed by Nixon, the tremendous overall ability of the man, the way he deals with people, his intellectual ability, his articulation. To a degree, you can judge a man by his enemies as well as his friends."

On leave from J. Walter Thompson, Haldeman signed aboard as an advance man for three months each in the 1956 and 1958 campaigns. He devoted an entire year to Nixon's 1960 presidential campaign. Back in California after that defeat, Haldeman helped research Nixon's book, *Six Crises*. He urged Nixon not to run for governor of California in 1962; then, overruled by Republican leaders, he faithfully managed the campaign. "I think it was fortunate for the country and for him that he didn't win," Haldeman says now. "If he had, he would have been propelled into running [for President] in 1964, and the chances of winning that election weren't very good."

Others wrote Nixon off. Haldeman didn't. "As long as I've known Nixon, I've felt he should be President. I didn't have any supernatural premonitions. I felt that despite the events of the '60's, he was not through." After the 1968 Oregon primary, Haldeman joined Nixon once more, toting a yellow legal pad choked with notes, as chief of the campaign staff.

When Haldeman forsook advertising for the White House, he took a "substantial" salary cut to his current $42,500 and threw away perquisites like stock options. That Haldeman would want to be assistant to anyone, even the President, surprised some colleagues, but Hugh Sutherland, who succeeded Haldeman as office manager, re-

asked him, 'If you had it to do over again, what would you do?' He said, 'I'd like to be the executive secretary of a major corporation.' He's got that in spades."

Organization is Haldeman's particular talent, though as an architect rather than a technician. He had designed the current infrastructure on the campaign trail before the election was secured.

"Why you have a White House staff," he says, "is to make it possible for the President to deal with the things he should be doing. His charge to us was to recognize that some things could be handled better by other people than by him.

". . . The President has been in public life for a long time. We have a pretty good codification of what his principles are. It's not difficult in most cases to know what his judgment would be. There are hundreds of thousands of decisions to be made by the White House. Most of them are routine. Only a small fraction would require his direct attention."

On paper, the staff is the biggest in White House history. Haldeman insists it is smaller than those of prior Administrations, who padded the ranks with employees borrowed from other departments. "We decided to bite the bullet and submit an honest budget," Haldeman typically puts it. "I felt it was something we had to do." He calls the current budget—about $8.5 million—a "ridiculous" bargain.

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"A really good presidential staff is one that has no coloration of its own," suggests John Ehrlichman, "but simply reflects the needs of the President in office." Haldeman has no exact precedent for his own job. The closest may be that set by Sherman Adams during the Eisenhower years, but Haldeman is not the sort who adapts to a cozy prior style, if only because his authority transcends mere administration. As Haldeman sees it: "Everything comes to a point where it goes to the President and comes to a point where it comes out from the President, and that's basically where I fit."

Haldeman functions as a taxing but fair straw boss. "Bob's approach is to find good people and then give them a helluva lot of responsibility, but then hold them strictly accountable for the results," says Fred Malek, who recruits White House talent. "While you have this responsibility and all the trappings that go with it, you damn well better produce."

The staff considers President Nixon a thoroughly kind person to work for, in small measure because Haldeman wields the discipline. He does not tolerate prima donnas or suffer time-wasters: "I get impatient with trivia and I get impatient with people who don't figure out their own solutions and get them done." Despite Haldeman's penchant for bluntness, the younger staffers approach him by first name and seem to dote on him. "I don't want someone waltzing me around the ball park before he tells me what he wants me to do," says Fred Malek. "You can't expect a man in Bob's position to sit down and wonder how he can correct something without hurting feelings. He'll just lay it out, whether you're right or wrong."

Aware that the President wants time for uninterrupted concentration, Haldeman zealously protects the sanctity of the Oval Office. A staffer recalls Haldeman's assertion: "Even John Mitchell comes through me." When Henry Kissinger joined the pre-Inaugural staff back at the Hotel Pierre in New York, he popped in to consult with Nixon through the day on each new concern. Haldeman took Kissinger aside and laid out the rules. Lesser unfortunates who try to end-run Haldeman on a dash to the ear of the President invariably find themselves slammed into the sidelines. "He's a nice guy, until you get in his way," one learned.

Consequently, Haldeman has become the lightning rod for recurrent charges of overprotectiveness. "He's *the* isolation of the President," insists a former staffer. "He's what they're complaining about." Haldeman doesn't see it that way. "I think my function is not one of isolating him but [of] making it possible for him to get the maximum exposure on the things that are productive. You've got to work out a way of using his time where it will do the most good. I don't see my job as keeping people out but getting them in."

Accessibility does not necessarily cure isolation, says Haldeman. "The test of isolation is not how much exposure he gets but the quality of exposure. I think I have a way of providing him with a range of useful exposure that makes him unisolated. If his door was always open and anyone who wanted could come in, then you'd call him unisolated. But then anyone—pressure groups or a pressure group—could completely dominate, and he would be much more isolated. . . .

"I think, unfortunately, Nixon may have a greater number of the press interested in his un-success."

"It's important that the President initiate, not simply react, and that requires some self-discipline and some planning."

The workdays of Bob Haldeman and Richard Nixon interlock. A black Chrysler from the White House motor pool picks up Larry Higby at 7:15 a.m. Haldeman slips into the left rear seat 15 minutes later. The limousine collects Dwight Chapin on the way downtown. They scan the daily news summary and begin paper work.

Nixon has already arrived in his Oval Office when Haldeman assembles the senior staff in the Roosevelt Room at 8:15. Haldeman otherwise avoids formal meetings. "One of Bob's primary responsibilities is being available to the President," says Larry Higby. "A man who's in meetings can't be available." That over, Haldeman, his familiar yellow pad tucked inside a brown-leather folder, walks in to see the President. "His inside pocket here," Haldeman gestures, "is full of papers that he's written notes on. He'll pull those out and go through that. He'll have things for me to take care of—questions on the schedule for that day, that kind of thing. He'll have read the news summary and there are things he frequently wants to discuss. It lasts a half hour to an hour." (Sometimes the session runs an hour and a half.) John Ehrlichman and Henry Kissinger follow to discuss domestic and foreign matters respectively. Haldeman may sit in. "He's sort of the conscience of us all in terms of the timeliness of the work," says Ehrlichman. "We try to take as many surprises as possible out of the President's day."

Unless there is a meeting with the National Security Council, the Cabinet or Republican leaders, the formal appointments begin at 10 a.m. These have been culled by Dwight Chapin under Haldeman's eye. "The decision who he's going to see isn't something I make in a vacuum," says Haldeman. "It's the result of the decision of staff people, his own instructions and external requests. . . . It's my job to balance things out so he has time to see who he has to see and, more important, has sufficient time to do his own work."

Where Johnson pushed for consensus, Nixon would rather listen to the opposing briefs argued before him, then make a decision. Haldeman may join in as devil's advocate. He has cogently present-

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ed viewpoints that he feels should be heard, though they are not his. "Someone here has to question everything," says Dwight Chapin. "Bob will sit in the President's office, and if he sees someone lobbying and can't answer them, he will call for someone who can. It's not unusual for him to come out and say, 'Will you get Robert Finch or George Shultz in here?' "

When the appointments end at 12:30, Haldeman meets with Nixon for up to another hour. The President eats his lunch, usually cottage cheese and pineapple, alone in an alcove of the Oval Office, or in the Executive Office Building next door. Haldeman adjourns with Larry Higby to his own working lunch, also cottage cheese and pineapple with a glass of milk, in his new office. An oil portrait of Nixon beside an American flag hangs on the green wall. The clock radio is tuned to an FM country-music station. The old office was next to the President's; Haldeman moved when traffic got too heavy.

While Nixon reads and signs paperwork, Haldeman wades through his own correspondence. The presidential buzzer on his green telephone often intrudes. Haldeman sees Nixon again before the longer appointments resume at 3:30. Later, Haldeman breaks for a cup of Constant Comment tea.

"At the end of the day," says Haldeman, "between six and seven, I go in. There are more notes on a yellow pad. He also makes notes all over everything that goes in." Haldeman turns these over for transcription by the secretaries.

In the limousine homeward, Haldeman checks tomorrow's schedule with Chapin and Higby. He was absent from his family so much on the campaigns that "by contrast, that I get home at all is pretty much an improvement." After dinner, he works into the evening. The President usually calls him on a direct line from the Lincoln Sitting Room back at the White House. If Haldeman goes out, Nixon finds him. After Larry Higby's daughter was born last January, the Haldemans stopped by the hospital. The White House phoned, and for several minutes, Higby listened to the President of the United States and his top assistant swap baby anecdotes.

"The thing [Presidents] Johnson and Eisenhower both told me was that my greatest contribution would be to get him to take time off," says Haldeman of his boss. "But I'm not overly concerned. He doesn't need much time off. He doesn't enjoy it." A change of scene suffices. When Nixon flies to San Clemente, Calif., or Key Biscayne, Fla., Haldeman travels too. The meetings at San Clemente run for hours on such heavy subjects, like the budget. At Key Biscayne, Nixon has more time of his own to write his speeches or read historical biographies. His favorite Presidents: Lincoln, Wilson and Teddy Roosevelt. (Haldeman's favorite, after his boss, is FDR.)

"He doesn't watch television," says Haldeman of Nixon. "Oh, sometimes he will watch sports. He never watches the news shows and he doesn't have a wire ticker in his office. He feels it necessary to have some perspective. He thinks it's better to get a report on it afterward.

"They're so wrong most of the time. Today's analysis of today's news can be very wrong, especially when they're under the pressure of getting a show together night after night. He realizes its value as a means of communication. He knows what was on last night. He gets a better feel from the summary than you would if you watched [TV]." The news summary—a distillation of 50 newspapers, the wire services and TV news—that Nixon receives daily also includes a selection of editorials and political cartoons. Haldeman terms the latter "brutality for the sake of brutality. Herblock wouldn't exist if he didn't have nasty cartoons of Nixon, nor would Conrad."

Over the years, Haldeman's own patience with the press has stretched thin. He concedes that any President is going to be regarded critically by reporters, but he nonetheless sees a distinction: "I think, unfortunately, Nixon may have a greater number of the press interested in his un-success, and I think it's accentuated with this President. He's got a more hostile press corps among the working press. The great bulk of the working press are Democrats, so there's a party difference to begin with. Ideologically, they have a liberal versus conservative approach to things. . . . I think, on a personal basis, a commentator or reporter who finds out he's wrong doesn't like to be proved wrong. Nixon's been written off a number of times and has refused to go away. That leaves those who wrote him off in an awkward situation."

Haldeman wonders if the message is penetrating what he considers the hostile ether of the press: "There's two supreme ironies in the way this Administration is viewed. We're supposed to be a public relations oriented Administration, but we're doing more with less public relations than others have done. The Kennedy Administration had a lot of great goals but got very little through Congress. Johnson got a lot through Congress, but he didn't accomplish what he wanted to do. We've gotten legislation through Congress that will accomplish what we set out to do.

"The other irony is the interpretation that everything Nixon does is for a political purpose. You could argue that the things he's done in so many major areas, rather than being big PR or political coups, have had negative political effects—but they were done in spite of this because they were right." Haldeman details them, from postal reform to the war with its incursions into Cambodia and Laos.

"Only the narrow decisions get to the President," explains Haldeman. "Almost by definition, a presidential decision is a decision made between two narrow alternatives. It would be decided on a lower level if it weren't. It's also made with the outlook the President has. But the chances of his being right are greater than someone else being right. If he's a good President, he'll be right more often. He has a better perspective than most of how narrow the decision is."

During the demonstrations last spring, Haldeman invited a score of students from Williams College into the White House. For two and a half hours, they argued in the Roosevelt Room. No minds were changed, but Haldeman hopes the students found him sincere. "I had a feeling I was ruining their day. I tried several times to end, so that [illegible] could go home and demonstrate, but they kept wanting to

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talk. These were basically a really solid group of kids. Oh, a couple of them were way out and said so. One was quoting Che Guevara and giving all the Red rhetoric. It's hard to argue with an ideologue." (Ironically, Hugh Sutherland recalls Haldeman reached that same conclusion after confronting some John Birchers at a meeting in West Los Angeles a few years ago.) Still, Haldeman thought it important enough to share a dialogue with youth inside the White House. "My feeling is that if we have a problem, that's where it is. But," he is quick to add, "I don't believe youth has slipped away."

Haldeman never doubts that Nixon will run again in 1972. "We're still wrapping up the nightmares, but the dreams are going to take time too. There's very much the need for a second term to provide time for what he's trying to do.

". . . We've got the genius and drive to accomplish what we need to domestically if we have a time of peace to do it. His whole objective is [the] achieving of a generation of peace." Thus, Nixon's intended visit to China. "The China thing is an example where he's worked behind the scenes," says Haldeman, "laying the groundwork and quietly moving on it over a period of years—with the results just now beginning to show."

The time will come, if not in 1972, then in 1976, when Haldeman will be out of a job. Employment as a presidential assistant doesn't offer any tenure. Haldeman has no interest in parlaying the experience into a political career for himself, nor does he want to write a book. He will withdraw from Washington, though not back to advertising.

Ambition has possessed Bob Haldeman, but in a manner almost surgically selfless. He drives himself to meet the destiny that he senses awaits the man he follows:

"Just as I've always thought he was going to be President, I think he's become President at the right time. Times are changing. The great leaders are gone. The towering leaders are going. There aren't any great leaders now, except Richard Nixon." END

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